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HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT

Monday, October 19, 1936

(FOR BROADCAST USE ONLY)

Subject: "THE McNARY MAPES AMENDMENT." Facts from the Federal Food and Drug Administration, United States Department of Agriculture.

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Everybody who uses a can opener will be interested in today's report from the Federal Food and Drug Administration. Our correspondent is discussing standards of quality for such canned foods as peaches and pears and peas, tomatoes, apricots, and cherries.

Also, she explains how the Government scientists test the tenderness of canned peas, with a so-called "false-teeth" machine, and how they test the color of canned tomatoes to see whether the product is the real red of ripe tomatoes or the yellowish red of unripe tomatoes.

But first, a little background information, so we'll understand why the Government makes these tests for consumers.

"Six years ago," writes our correspondent, "in July 1930 Congress passed the McNary Mapes Amendment to the Food and Drugs Act. The canners themselves asked for this Amendment, to protect the canning industry from the competition of substandard products not labeled to show that they were substandard, and to protect consumers against unwittingly buying this sort of stuff.

"The McNary Mapes Amendment gives the Secretary of Agriculture power to establish a minimum standard of quality for each kind of canned food except milk and meat products. As soon as the Secretary has established a minimum standard of quality for a certain canned food, that food must measure up to the requirements -- or else carry certain facts on the label so that the housewife will know when she is not getting a standard quality of food.

"So far, the Secretary has established minimum standards for canned peaches, pears, peas, dry peas, tomatoes, apricots, and cherries. Now . . . let's consider tomatoes, since they're one of the most popular of all canned products. Every can of tomatoes that does not measure up to the Government standards must say so. The label must state: 'Below U. S. Standard.' Following this line, 'Below U. S. Standard,' there must be another statement, assuring consumers that below-standard canned foods are wholesome, even though they are of low quality or grade.

"Now there's another requirement under the McNary-Mapes Amendment. It is that slack-filled canned goods must carry a line reading: 'Below U. S. Standard -- Slack Fill.' And if the canned goods contains an excessive amount of liquid, that fact also must be printed on the label, in these words: 'Contains Excessive Added Liquid.'

"So read all the information on the label, homemakers, when you buy canned apricots, cherries, peaches, pears, tomatoes, and peas. You'll know whether you're buying food that measures up to the Government standards of quality, or food that

is below standard, or slack filled. Of course whichever you buy is wholesome -- otherwise it couldn't be sold at all.

"And bear in mind," continues our reporter, "that the Food and Drug Administration provides for only one standard of quality for these canned foods, and that is a minimum standard -- a low one. There's a wide range in quality above this minimum, but the law does not provide for any labeling to classify canned goods above the standard. Grades above the standard are permissive -- not compulsory."

Now let's see how the Federal food men actually go about testing such products as canned tomatoes and canned peas -- to see whether they should be labeled substandard.

"The other day," says our correspondent, "I watched a Government chemist examine 24 cans -- a regular size sample -- of canned tomatoes. They represented a consignment suspected of being not ripe enough for canning -- too light in color to meet the Government standards, although they were not labeled substandard.

"The chemist opened each can separately, drained the can exactly two minutes, and then weighed out half the drained weight -- the poorest colored half. He ground the tomato pulp rather fine, put it in a saucer, and took this sample to a 'dark room.' In the dark room is a remarkable machine called a 'color comparator.' The chemist, by juggling a series of colored discs until they blended into the same color as that of the tomatoes, soon matched the sample, and was able to 'read' the color. Translated into ordinary terms for the sake of Your Correspondent, the color was a light yellow red -- certainly not the color we associate with ripe tomatoes.

"I didn't stand by while the chemist examined all 24 cans of tomatoes," says our reporter, "but they all looked more yellow than red to me. I won't be at all surprised to learn that this particular lot of tomatoes will not appear on the market again, until they have been labeled substandard.

"Now, about the machine that measures the tenderness of canned peas -- and goes by the inelegant name of 'false-teeth' machine. This instrument measures the pressure required to crush a pea to one-fourth its original size. A pea from the can under test is put under a plunger, and more and more force is exerted on the plunger by pouring mercury into a hopper on top of the plunger. The tougher the pea, the more mercury required to crush it. It took considerable mercury to crush some of the peas the chemists were testing the day I watched them," says our correspondent. "In fact, they were about the toughest peas I'd ever seen. I was glad the Food and Drug inspectors had removed them from the market before I got around to buying this particular brand.

"Nowadays," (still quoting), "when canned peas are taken off the market because they are substandard and not so labeled, you may be quite sure the cans contain excessive amounts of over-mature peas. The peas were pretty tough to begin with, though cooking under pressure may have made them tender enough to cheat the 'false-teeth' machine. However, the telltale starch is still there. Further, it may cause the tough peas to rupture and thus betray themselves.

"This is the basis of another test for canned peas -- a chemical test involving the amount of starch they contain. Tender green peas in the pod -- young peas -- contain very little starch. The older they grow, the more starch they contain. According to Government standards mature vegetables composed of more than approximately one-fourth starch are too old for canning."

And that concludes today's report on the McNary Mapes Amendment to the Pure Food law, and a few of the methods the Government uses to test canned foods.

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